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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SIKHS THREATEN SERIOUS TROUBLE IN INDIAN PUNJAB

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE
Office of Current Intelligence

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Sikhs Threaten Serious Trouble in Indian Punjab

1. New Delhi is facing a major political crisis in the Punjab, where the Sikh religious minority has resumed its agitation for a separate Punjabi-speaking state. Sant Fateh Singh, the Sikhs' most influential leader, has announced he will undertake a "fast and self-immolation" to culminate four weeks hence. The Sant had issued a similar suicide threat last August, but postponed it in September when the Indo-Pakistani warfare in Kashmir spread to the Punjab.

2. The Punjabi Sikhs, who comprise about a third of the state's population, have long demanded that Hindi be dropped as a coequal official state language. They argue that the practice is inconsistent with the 1956 reorganization of the Indian states along linguistic lines. Since Punjabi is the majority tongue, the Sikhs insist that New Delhi should either make Punjabi the sole official language or partition the state into Punjabi- and Hindi-speaking areas.

3. The state's Hindu majority adamantly opposes the single-language concept, fearing that it would eventually result in Sikh domination. Hindus are divided on alternative proposals, however. Those who live in the northwest, where Sikhs predominate, would strongly resist any concession to Sikh demands, even though they are themselves Punjabi speakers. In the economically depressed southeast, a substantial proportion of the Hindi-speaking Hindu majority favor partition, believing that they will thereby benefit from a greater infusion of development funds.

4. The Congress Party government of the Punjab, already strained by factional infighting, is likely to be further torn by disagreements over language policy.

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Chief Minister Ram Kishan, a Hindu, has been critized for overly emphatic statements that the Sikh demands would not be met. Many other party leaders, both Sikh and Hindu, are compelled by regional and religious loyalties to support one of several partition proposals. The disruptive bickering has already had an adverse effect upon economic development programs, and the situation may grow worse.

5. New Delhi appointed special parliamentary and cabinet committees last year to study the situation in the Punjab. Prime Minister Shastri's death and the preoccupation with finding a successor interrupted their deliberations. The cabinet committee automatically lapsed when its members tendered their pro forma resignations from the government, and it must now be reappointed.

6. Efforts to find a solution are not necessarily doomed to failure, but great ingenuity will be required, and time is running out. Fateh Singh, not overly eager to carry his immolation threat to its logical conclusion, would probably accept some sort of compromise. His archrival for Sikh leadership, Master Tara Singh, will not let him off the hook easily, however, and New Delhi cannot rule out the possibility that events will get out of control.

7. If the dramatic self-immolation actually occurs, it could raise Sikh-Hindu communal antagonisms to a dangerous level. This could pose a threat to public order in the Punjab, and it would almost certainly cost the Congress Party votes in the 1967 state and national elections.

8. The animosity could also spill over into the army, about half of which consists of Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs. The high order of discipline and detachment from politics of the Indian armed forces usually dampens the military reaction to civilian issues. On the other hand, the traditional practice of recruiting and training soldiers in ethnic and regional regiments (the Sikh Light Infantry, the Jat Infantry, etc.) and assigning them to ethnic/regional battalions increases the troops' awareness of developments back home. Prior to India's independence, Sikh and Hindu units found themselves on the opposite sides of a mutiny on several occasions.

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